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## Gender and public relations: Perspectives, applications and questions.

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It is impossible to understand adequately the social construction of public relations without closely examining its gendered nature. The work of feminist-inspired scholars has brought to our attention the centrality of gender in shaping social relations, pointing out that gender is one of the central organising principles around which social life revolves. We believe that inquiry into public relations as a gendered practice will bring deeper understanding of its internal and external relationships, its past and future directions, and its cultural variety. Thus this special issue of *PRism* enables us to take stock of knowledge in a certain domain and at a particular point in time. It helps us to identify some common concerns and differences among scholars currently researching public relations as viewed from the conceptual lens of gender.

Although there is an extant (small) body of pioneering feminist scholarship that problematises gender in public relations, gender is a relatively undefined area of thinking in the field. To some extent, this is due to the mainstream preoccupation in research and publications with concerns that are underpinned by a functionalist epistemology, that is, one that sidelines critical or evaluative approaches. In seeking to buttress the conservative position, such research rejects the interests of critical and feminist scholars who wish to stimulate emancipation and social change. We believe that the articles in this special issue make an exciting start to the disruption of the status quo by calling attention to the absence of gender in much public relations knowledge and teaching. Hopefully, future researchers will be challenged to interrogate how gender is accomplished and transformed, and thereby

how power is exercised and inequality (re)produced or challenged in public relations.

While this is not the place to engage in a wide-ranging review of the huge volume of work that has been conducted on gender in other fields, and the various theoretical approaches to its analysis, we do consider that a few preliminaries are in order. These include a brief overview of some of the theoretical approaches referred to by the authors of the articles within this collection. However, rather than examine the relevance of these approaches to public relations, we choose instead to leave that task to the collection's contributors.

Our starting point is 'gender'. From a sociological stance, this is not about being female or male - but rather about the negotiation, construction and performance of masculine or feminine identities. This anti-deterministic approach is discussed by Giddens (with Sutton 2009, p. 601) who argues that "gender...concerns the psychological, social and cultural differences between males and females. Gender is linked to socially constructed notions of masculinity and femininity; it is not necessary a direct product of an individual's biological sex."<sup>1</sup> Early articulations in the 1970s of sex/gender relations were terms like 'sexism' and 'male chauvinism' which connoted an oppressive,

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<sup>1</sup> More recently, postmodern feminists, such as Judith Butler, take the idea of social negotiation even further, claiming that the categories of masculine and feminine are in themselves heteronormative social constructions. Bryson (2003, p. 134) argues these positions build on the work of Simone De Beauvoir and as a result the "uncoupling of sex and gender not only means that there may be no necessary link between biological sex and being a man or a woman, but it opens up ways of thinking and becoming that move beyond a binary male/female gender system and towards the possibility of a fluid multiplicity of genders".

objectionable but nonetheless rigid and stable set of relations between men and women. This positioning of gender unwittingly set narrow parameters of thought around the topic. Australian feminist intellectual, Anne Summers, whose 1975 book *Damned Whores and God's Police* described the lack of choice for women because of polarising sexual stereotypes, wrote that: "We had yet to start using the term gender. We described the world as being determined by differences, and inequalities, in sex and, while the distinction is perhaps a semantic one, I believe that once we began to use the more neutral term gender more people could understand and agree with us" (1994, p. 16). Adopting this view of gender, this themed edition presents new insights on public relations as determined by difference.

Clearly concepts of gender and feminism are intellectually aligned. Hesse-Biber's definition of feminist theory and praxis illustrates this when she writes that:

"[A feminist perspective challenges] knowledge that excludes, while seeming to include – assuming that when we speak of the generic term men, we also mean women, assuming that what is true for dominant groups must also be true for women and other oppressed groups. Feminists ask 'new' questions that place women's lives and those of 'other' marginalised groups at the center of social inquiry" (2007, p. 3).

Feminist scholars' embrace of difference (across gender, ethnicity and class) extends not only to their research focus and methodologies, but also to their take on feminism itself. Navigating the theoretical ground, therefore, can be difficult as there have been many prominent thinkers who have formed a range of contested positions based around sets of inter-related ideas. Nonetheless, an understanding of this intellectual terrain - with its many tensions and differences in the socially visible forms

of feminist theory and praxis - can help develop finely tuned frameworks for understanding the range of ways we can analyse public relations and gender. For example, liberal feminism advocates women's equality in all spheres of personal, public and professional life. This theoretical perspective – which came into its own during what became known as feminism's 'first wave', in the early decades of the twentieth century - derives from 'liberal ideology, particularly feminist campaigns for freedom of choice and equality before the law' (Humm, 1995, pp. 150-151).

While the achievements of the early women's movement were monumental, some argued that the more nuanced and marginalised forms of disadvantage were eclipsed, including in research and scholarship. In the 1960s and 1970s, some scholars therefore attempted "to merge feminist analyses of patriarchy with Marxist analyses of class to create a more complex socialist feminist theory of women's oppression" (Naples, 2007, p. 581). They located the oppressed status of women in the sexual division of labour, identifying this as a central feature of capitalism. Others, such as black feminist writers influenced by radical feminism, accused white feminism of insensitivity "in assuming that white experience could speak for that of all women" (Humm, 1995, p. 25). The recognition of black women as well as Third World women's struggles against multiple forces of discrimination led feminist scholars to articulate the concept of intersectionality whereby gender, race, class and sexuality were seen to interlock and co-constitute as axes of power (Kim, 2007).

During this period, radical feminists rejected the liberal feminist perspective, regarding women's difference from men as essential, and the patriarchy as systemically embedded. Women's oppression was seen to be the primary, most extensive, and deepest oppression (Jaggar & Rothenberg, 1994). Radical feminists argued that liberal feminist thinking was narrowly locked into patriarchal ideals which were "based on categories of thought which, while they appear to be impartial, are both an expression of and a means to women's subordination" (Bryson, 2003, p. 162). Many strands of what is known

as second-wave feminism continue to be active today, alongside concepts such as post-feminism which have more recently emerged, the latter “a term sometimes used, particularly in the mass media, to imply that the feminist movement is no longer needed as women have achieved legal equality” (Humm, 1995, p. 215). This is despite the fact that, as liberal feminists argue, women continue to be raped and beaten, as well as suffer discrimination in employment, domestic life and media representations.

Theories of liberal and radical feminism contrast with post-modern feminist theories, which oppose essentialism and recognise the limitations of perceiving women as a universal or unified group (Rosser, 2007). Writers and researchers who consider themselves third-wave feminists appreciate diversity, endeavouring to build alliances with men and other marginalised groups. Claiming that the reforms won by second-wave feminism have not been sufficiently woven into everyday life, they assert that their politics must be ingrained in “personal, bodily resistance to oppressive ideologies” (Wood, 2011, p. 87). Despite these divergent strands of feminist theory, an overarching theme of feminism is to improve the lives of those who are marginalised, specifically women.

Thus the socially constructed concept of gender expands thinking about power relations and privilege for women, as well as for men, and how these are affected by the interplay of social, cultural and institutional practices. Moreover, an investigation of gender, especially in relation to media industries and knowledge-based occupations such as public relations, opens up a rich vein of research. Indeed, a fascinating intersection exists between gender on the one hand, as a fluid and negotiated process performed through every social interaction, and public relations on the other, as an occupation through which public identities and realities can be constructed and manipulated to produce powerful hegemonic conceptions. One area ripe for investigation is public relations’ practitioners’ role as cultural workers in the production and reproduction of

media texts which can affect representation and the development of social norms, values and beliefs, particularly around gender. Arguably this critical nexus between media production and gender in turn influences the content and dissemination of ideas, and is positioned further by contemporary global media-ownership patterns that continue a tradition of being “corporate, elite, and male” (Byerly, 2002, p. 130).

Significantly, the case for researching gender and its relationship to public relations is strengthened by the fact that public relations is a field that has been dominated by functionalist paradigms. According to Giddens, under functionalism, any problems that weaken an essentially conservative position, such as a challenge to beliefs about traditional ideals and sex roles, are likely to be given low status:

[T]he functionalist approach sees society as a system of interlinked parts which, when in balance, operate smoothly to produce social solidarity. Thus, functionalist and functionalist-inspired perspectives on gender seek to show that gender differences contribute to social stability and integration. While such views once commanded great support, they have been heavily criticised for neglecting social tensions at the expense of consensus and for promulgating a conservative view of the social world (with Sutton, 2009, p. 614).

So public relations can be viewed as a prime site to investigate gendered relations, not just because of the interesting intersections between gender as performed and negotiated and public relations as a domain that manages and constructs powerful identities, but also because a functionalist approach deliberately avoids deeper reflection and is loathe to uncover problematic issues such as gender.

This conservative positioning also reaches into higher education, which in the main, has embedded a functionalist approach to the teaching of public relations. Indeed much public relations education can be viewed as

having a bias towards 'techne' and the production of useful tools or artefacts. As a corollary, public relations education at a university level places great store on students acquiring technical expertise, often validated through positivist quantitative methods (for example, program planning and evaluation, as well as the production of tactical devices such as media releases) rather than an examination of how these objects are created in the first place and who or what they serve.

However, perhaps this partiality is in the process of changing. Kornelsen (2006, p.79) suggests that as teachers develop confidence and maturity they recognise limitations of process: "It was not that techniques and methods no longer mattered; they did. But the emphasis shifted, from their implementation to the purpose". He argues that "this transition from a way of doing to a way of being" links to "two forms of Aristotelian knowledge, techne and phronesis. Techne is knowledge possessed by a maker and suggests sovereignty over; phronesis is knowledge that is personal and suggests communal engagement with" (Kornelsen, 2006, p.79).

Thus it is reasonable to suggest that, as a relative newcomer in the academy, orthodox public relations - characterised by functionalism and positivism and with an emphasis on techne - is likely to pay scant attention to the gendered issues at the core of public relations. Moreover, if researchers from within these mainstreams do investigate gender - it is likely they will produce research that validates functionalist values such as stability, predication and control (Deacon et al., 1999, p. 4). However, building on the ideas of Kornelsen, as the field matures and develops confidence, it may shift its technical emphasis to a more purposeful reflection.

So a gap exists and new ways of thinking are needed. Importantly an innovative investigation of gender and public relations has to take a different direction. As many of our authors have pointed out, one of the most significant trends in media and knowledge-based industries such as public relations is the feminisation or increase in women in the occupation. However, what is the impact of

this on equality and inequality in terms of pay scales, promotion opportunities and earnings? What does it mean for marginalised groups such as women from ethnic minorities whose images are absent from or backgrounded in campaign texts and corporate documents? And significantly what is the impact of this in terms of the roles people play in the workplace, the relationships they engage in, and the creation of identity and its empowering or disempowering effects? More centrally, how do we understand this phenomenon and, importantly, what questions should we be asking? We need to know how meanings around gender and public relations are negotiated, produced and distributed, and what the unquestioned assumptions and ideologies are that underlie this. Lastly, what theories help us shed light on this and what sites of investigation help us to understand these questions and their ramifications more deeply?

If we are to examine these questions, then we must at the same time consider how we approach our research practice. Not all research on gender constitutes a feminist critique, as we earlier have pointed out. Nevertheless, there is much we can learn from feminist inquiry because it reminds us that all scholarship and research is a social process constituted by relations of power. Therefore, no matter what critical stance a researcher takes, a feminist methodology enables us to challenge "status quo forms of research by linking theory and method in a synergistic relationship that brings epistemology, methodology, and method into a dynamic interaction across the research process" (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007, p. 143).

Feminist researchers use an array of investigative techniques which are influenced by their research questions and their disciplinary norms. Some research is strategically quantitative such as the use of surveys to produce evidence of numbers of assaults, income levels of men and women in employment etc to influence public policy. However, some feminists have argued that quantitative methods are either in need of reformulation to reduce the hierarchical nature of research relationships or that they are antithetical to feminist aims because they are grounded in positivist, masculinist notions of



'science' (Harding's various publications offer a consideration of epistemological issues in feminist research (e.g. 1987)). By contrast, those favouring qualitative approaches (such as critical discourse analysis, phenomenology, or ethnography) claim that because these are based on a social constructivist position, they are more readily able to provide an ethical corrective to the types of so-called androgynous, objective research that has been attacked by feminist scholars.

Key features of qualitative methods when used within a critical framework<sup>2</sup> that includes feminism are firstly their ability to embrace complexity and diversity in both the research process and the findings that are uncovered. Daymon and Holloway (2011, p. 7) note that "qualitative researchers seek to uncover the views and meanings held by research participants, to understand the world in their terms and therefore to take account of the many, changing ways of understanding", such as what it means to be a woman who is impacted by corporate communication messages. Qualitative research when undertaken by feminist researchers aims to be a non-exploitative process based on the notion that researchers are never just observers and those under scrutiny are never just passive subjects. Research therefore is characterised by authenticity and reciprocity between the researcher and participants. For instance, informants are often involved with the researcher in some aspects of interpreting the data through probing when interviewing or through 'member checking'. Where there remains potential for actually empowering participants through research is in the promotion of methods that will involve them in the first place in posing problems, in analysing the data or in building conclusions.

A further feature of qualitative research that is valuable for the study of gender is that

it is emergent and processual, creatively and inductively grounded in the experiences of and meanings produced by participants. Research procedures may be "unstructured, adaptable and sometimes spontaneous, allowing you to take advantage of serendipity" (Daymon & Holloway, 2011, p. 8), thereby revealing the unexpected or paradoxical presence of power dynamics. Throughout, the researcher needs to be constantly reflexive in recognition that "their philosophical stance, background, experiences, biases and emotions ... substantially influence both the design of the enquiry and the eventual knowledge that is produced" (p. 9). It is perhaps not surprising then that many of the papers in this collection have pursued research from a social constructivist position, employing approaches and techniques influenced by phenomenology, ethnography and critical discourse analysis.

This themed edition of *PRism* is situated firmly in the tradition of communication studies. According to O'Sullivan et al., the object of communication studies is "the social world that we ourselves inhabit not 'exact science'" (1996, p. xi) and furthermore, investigation in this area is characterised by drawing on a "variety of established academic disciplines and discourses" in "the attempt to say new things in new ways" (p. xii). It also articulates with the development of deeper understanding through the embrace of phronesis and a critical approach which encourages reflexivity (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). It does this through an examination of the complexities and embedded assumptions in public relations and an analysis of how they have shaped thinking and practice. A core concept in a critical approach is that there is not one single way to 'think' or 'do' public relations - rather multiple and diverse perspectives and experiences which influence action (L'Etang, 2008). Moreover a critical approach considers relations of power between actors and its effects. Applied to public relations, it therefore acknowledges that, paradigmatically, there are certain phenomena that have been included and excluded in research and teaching, such as gender. Significantly, thinking about public relations and gender from a communicative point of

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<sup>2</sup> Critical theory and its concerns, as expressed in qualitative research, are outlined by Lincoln and Denzin (2003) and Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009). The edited text by L'Etang and Pieczka (2006) introduces the work of a range of critical scholars in public relations.

view will help develop knowledge of what questions need to be raised.

Knowledge in these areas could produce a range of benefits for men and women in our media-saturated society. For example, a deeper understanding of gender and public relations could enable communication and media organisations to co-construct fairer and more equitable workplaces in recognition of the important cultural role they play in the communities of which they are situated. Questions of concern where feminist insights may be empowering and transformative are the following, each of which is likely to require the sensitivity of a qualitative research approach:

- What are the differentiated gendered positions in public relations and their intersections with class, race, sexuality and family or community?
- How are gendered identities hegemonically promoted and essentialised through discourse and textual products and materialities?
- What roles are assumed in the workplace, what organisational cultural values motivate these, and what skills and attributes are required and reified to support these roles?
- In what ways is the human body in the public relations' workplace as well as in promotional materials. a site of social meaning which provides evidence of power, sexual identity and status?
- How do classroom and teaching materials promote or marginalise gender, and what are the implications for the critical engagement of students in society, as well as their career choices?

### **The Offerings of this Special Issue**

The scholarly articles in this special issue have addressed a number of key concerns which include identity, professionalisation and professional identities, ethical and

strategic decision-making, and media portrayal.

In the first article in this collection, [Kate Fitch and Amanda Third](#) raise important questions about the ways that the public relations industry and academy are embedded within broader structures of gendered power and meaning. Through a sociological and historical analysis of feminisation and professionalisation, they foreground their study in the work of feminist scholars writing about the sociology of work as well as public relations. Fitch and Third posit that processes of feminisation and impetus to professionalisation operate within a context of wider social change concerning women and work as well as institutional processes and mechanisms. This mutual reinscription has fuelled patriarchal gender relations within the public relations industry and academy since the 1980s and continues to do so. Unless we pay close and critical attention to the social, cultural, and historical factors that circumscribe gender relations in contemporary society, then inequity is likely to be perpetuated with a continued lack of women at the most senior membership levels, and also a low status in terms of legitimacy and recognition for public relations within the academy.

Shifting from the first article's macro perspective on the gendering of public relations as a profession and its impact on women to a more micro view on the same topic, [Liz Yeomans](#) employs a phenomenological methodology to explore how the professional identities of British public relations consultants are negotiated, a process involving deliberate emotional labour located within a masculine discourse of professionalisation. Her work is one of the first to investigate the exploitation of emotion as a resource in public relations, notably in client management and media relations. Her findings offer further insights into not only the gendering of the professional, but also the political and performative nature of professionalisation.

In examining the perceptions of public relations professionals about their own strategic effectiveness, [Piet Voerhoeven and Noelle Aarts](#) show that in all European countries, with the exception of Eastern Europe, male public relations professionals assume they have a

greater influence on strategic decision-making and planning than do female professionals. Verhoeven and Aarts attribute this to the influence of the different interpretive communities of men and women which validate and sustain power (im)balances in organisations by means of organisational and professional conversations. These currently feed gender stereotyping and stigmatisation at local levels which will not change until the conversational framing of women as less powerful than men is altered. In the meantime, the use by women of new social media technologies may empower them in their public relations role by increasing their self-perception of effectiveness.

While reminding us that women's experiences are diverse and cannot be essentialised to a singular 'feminine', [Elsbeth Tilley](#) points nevertheless to the value of a feminist perspective on ethical decision-making because this provides an important corrective to the predominantly male perspective in theorising. Drawing on theories of feminist ethics which, she argues, have resonance for both men and women, she identifies how kinship, or relational commitment and affinity in organisations, helps to overcome gendered differences in the ethical reasoning process. Relationships therefore influence ethical decision-making regardless of gender, with implications for the work of public relations practitioners who are involved in dealing with diverse workforces, and also developing ethical standards and procedures.

[Jane Johnston](#) considers the film and television representations of women in public relations roles and the possible impact of these on how individuals working in public relations may define themselves. Because the media act as a reference point about the profession of public relations within the broader structure of society and the workplace, when women are portrayed in limited and negative roles - as Johnston's study indicates - then public and professional knowledge of public relations is negatively influenced. Johnson argues that public relations is culturally constructed as an occupation that is deeply flawed in its

relations to women, with consequences for how women working in public relations define themselves, and how students perceive the nature of public relations with regard to their career choices. For tertiary educators, the challenge is to counteract these popular culture depictions of public relations.

The final academic article in the collection also tackles the topic of the media portrayal of women. [Jennifer Vardeman-Winter and Natalie T.J. Tindall](#) focus on a North American health campaign from the perspective of the campaign's public. They identify how women from racial minority groups interpret diversely the intended meanings of public relations producers, thus resisting the essentialised identities that are ascribed to them. Importantly, Vardeman-Winter and Tindall challenge the traditional notion of cultural identity as universal and singular, and note that identity is more complex than a (single) gendered lens assumes. Identities, they remind us, are also raced, ethnic, classed and community-related, and people's identities are multiple and layered. Such interconnections of difference, or intersectionality, have implications for how public relations messages are crafted and targeted. We suggest that their ideas may resonate with future researchers interested in investigating the fragmented, local and performative nature of identity and public relations, an area that has not really been explored in this issue.

### *Commentaries*

For many young women on North American university campuses, the risk of sexual assault is unacceptably high. [Rowena L. Briones](#) gives an account of how female university students perceive and engage with this issue, and offers recommendations for public relations practice. The following commentary by [Paul Elmer](#) offers a nascent autoethnographic account - based on his current doctoral studies - of how notions of masculinity affected his own employment opportunities and working practices in British government relations. He posits that public relations work is embodied, emotional and sexualised. Along with the next article by Susan O'Byrne (in the Industry

section of this edition), his work points to an as yet unexplored topic in public relations academic research: gendered embodiment and performativity. Earlier, Liz Yeomans has alluded to the interrelationship between emotion and bodily display, but no scholar has yet taken up the challenge to explicitly investigate the material or physical gendering in public relations, and therefore we highlight this as an area for future research.

### *Voices from the Industry*

In this section, we present the opinions of two senior practitioners currently working in public relations consultancies in Perth and Sydney. [Susan O'Byrne](#), writing about her experiences of consulting in both Western Australia and the UK, questions the different dress codes that exist for men and women in public relations, and considers how the sexualised bodily displays of young women practitioners may mask their abilities to do the job. In introducing the views of men employed in a range of different sectors, [Graham White](#) who heads up a Sydney consultancy, rejects the use of gender as a heuristic for understanding the roles and careers of people in public relations. We suggest that the ideas in these two papers might be usefully contrasted with the thesis presented in the first article in this collection by Fitch and Third.

### *Reviews*

[Steve Mackey](#)'s book review identifies gender as deeply implicated not only in public relations but also in relationships between people and between individuals and their everyday routines. He argues that socially manufactured gender roles create harmful thinking and behaviour with dire consequences for women which, in the extreme, can result in 'blood, broken bones and broken minds'. Mackey sees the strongest intersection of gender with public relations in the management of ideology, when rhetoric is deployed to affect the perceptions of publics. The final contribution is a review by [Rob Brown](#) of unpublished

papers by writer Doris Fleishmann, wife of a North American public relations pioneer. Describing her as a feminist who compromised her once-ardent position, he articulates some of her private and public struggles for legitimacy, which he likens to the same dualities inherent in public relations itself.

As editors, we would like to thank our international panel of reviewers from Australia, New Zealand, the UK and the USA for their expert insights and comments which have aided the development of what we hope is a significant contribution to critical thinking about public relations. This edition of *PRism* is intended to help readers visualise the dynamics of gender and public relations. But beyond this the collection of papers helps us to understand previous and current directions and get a sense of an emerging discourse. It is purposeful reflection in these areas that this edition of the journal seeks to elicit.

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